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## *Pakistan at the Crossroads, Again*

Several recent events in Pakistan are indicative of trouble brewing in the land of my birth once again. A couple of intertwined regressive discourses, have coalesced at this moment that, depending upon how they are handled and resolved (or not)—could determine the future direction the country takes.

The first of these discourses one would like to think is well on its way to being relegated to the dustbin of history, given the spotlight shone on it by the #Metoo movement of recent years, with its global scope. But no! The same old tired clichés and misogynistic stereotypes of women as whores, responsible for their own rapes, for the male violence committed against their (sinful) bodies (in Islamic parlance, their bodies are the source of *fitna*, or chaos), have once again flooded Pakistani airwaves. What makes such unfounded and derogatory claims worse, by blaming the victims instead of the perpetrators of the crimes, is that the danger they represent to the female citizens of Pakistan today is issuing forth from the lips of the man elected to protect them: Prime Minister Imran Khan. He is, sadly, not the first leader of the country to have made such remarks which, as Andrea Dworkin, radical US based feminist put it so aptly in the title of her 1974 book, is evidence in the broader culture, of an attitude and ideology she calls, *Woman Hating*. Such hatred of women, leads, as another feminist scholar named Susan Brownmiller noted, to what she termed Rape Culture; that is, a culture, like Pakistan's today, though hardly confined to it— that justifies the rape and mistreatment of women that has deep theological and mythological roots. In a persuasive analysis of the role of fairy tales in delineating female archetypes that teach women (and men) how to behave in worldwide patriarchal culture, we learn, claims Dworkin, that women are either “good” or “bad.” Much like the

Biblical story of the Fall of Adam and Eve from Paradise into a debased and degenerate world—all women, like the first mother, Eve—are to be blamed for this ejection of Man [sic] from the Garden of Eden. Succumbing to temptation and tasting of the Tree of Knowledge, which is a metaphor for sexual knowledge and thus bespeaks a loss of innocence—Eve literally, leads poor Adam down the garden path, consorts with the satanic serpent, and thus, inaugurates humankind’s entry into a corrupt secular world.

If Eve is an evil whore, then Mary is the good woman because she bears her son, Jesus, without soiling her purity with the dirty act of sex. Voila: we have the beginnings of our still-current Virgin/Whore dichotomy, that Pakistan’s cricketer sex symbol- turned- pious-head- of -state, Imran Khan, put on full display with his recent remarks stating that the rising numbers of child abuse and rape cases in Pakistan, were a result of “obscurity” in society for which he blamed Hollywood and Bollywood (the West!India!). He then went on to state, on public television, that women in Pakistan should remove “temptation” from men, because “not everyone has willpower”. To further protect men from said “temptation” which leads them to commit the heinous crime of rape, as it were against their “better natures”—this moral stalwart of Pakistani society claimed that “women should observe purdah – a term referring to women wearing modest clothes around unrelated men, or simply, the segregation between sexes.” It is a short step from making such claims about women’s “fallen nature” that men need “protection” from, to mandating that women “cover up” as we have seen happen in neighboring Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini’s “Islamic Revolution”, Afghanistan under Taliban rule, and Turkey heading that way under Rayyip Erdogan.

What women who rail against “liberal values” that they see as a corrupting influence on “brainwashed” westernized elites fail to understand, is that such a rhetoric of piety victimizes them as well. To reference Dworkin once more,

The good woman must be possessed.

The bad woman must be killed or punished.

Both must be nullified. (p 48)

[1] I am referring here to the wonderful book published in 1987 by the late Muslim To be punished, punished enough so that the bad woman can become good, is to essentially be destroyed, stripped of her essence, of what made the woman her true self. Which ofcourse means that the “good woman” –who is good only in the context of not being “bad”, of being turned away from what has made her a bad” woman, a whore in the first place—is to acquiesce to be seen and judged as victim—a victim of her fallen nature. She must

adopt the posture of victimization, the passivity that defines the victim, a passivity that demands abuse. In the world of fairy tales told to women, and internalized by many if not all of us—that abuse is euphemistically referred to as being “saved” (from our own Jezebel selves). We wait for our Prince Charming, who in today’s Pakistan is either a Mullah or a Macho man, a Priest or a Prime Minister.

Enter Regressive Discourse #2: the old Military-Mullah “Militalblishment” that has led Pakistan a merry dance indeed throughout its less-than-a-century-old existence, using extremist outfits like the TLP and many others like it for their various purposes. For the past 4 days, the country has been held hostage by the spectacle of the TLP (Tehreek-i-Labaik Pakistan)—a far-right Islamist political party founded in 2015 by a mullah named Khadim Hussain Rizvi—unleashing mass protests on the streets of several major Pakistani cities, claiming the government has reneged on its agreement to eject the French ambassador from the country by April 20<sup>th</sup>, a deadline previously agreed to, but ahead of which their current leader (Hafiz Saad), has been arrested. Macron’s refusal to ban cartoons deemed blasphemous by members of the TLP in the wake of the murder of a French schoolteacher last year who was wrongly accused of showing such cartoons to his students, was the trigger for such a demand. PM Imran Khan, a civilian leader backed by the military, had initially responded with great pride to appease the then-leader of the TLP Khadim Rizvi (who died last November and has been succeeded by his son, Hafiz Saad Rizvi), by stating that

the TLP must not forget that no one has done more than [me] to internationally highlight the issue of blasphemy, not because of the TLP but because it was an article of [my] faith. But as with prior cynical use of extremist outfits for their own power games, the Militalblishment which also controls Imran Khan, is now trying to roll back its influence by arresting its leaders and banning the party. The editorial in *The Friday Times* of Pakistan this week makes the following valid observation

A potential Militalblishment ally or asset is threatening to become a dangerous liability like so many others in the past....The Militalblishment imagined it could guide and control it [TLP] for its own short-term goals inside the country as it did when it unleashed it Against the PMLN government [of Nawaz Sharif who had outlived his usefulness to the Army]...Unfortunately, the Labaik has nurtured and grown to threatening proportions....Therefore, the belated attempt to rollback the Labaik by “banning” it is not going to work

The Labaik or TLP is now a bonafide political party with a huge following in Pakistan and cannot be so easily silenced or sidelined. As Raza Rumi, director of the Park Center for Independent Media at Ithaca College, said in a recent episode of Naya Daur TV, a liberal online news show he coordinates, it is the “extremist mindset” that has led over many decades to the mushrooming of such parties and organizations, which needs to be challenged and changed, and which requires a very different approach and longer term strategy.

However, given what we know and can observe from the latest statements on “obscurity” linked to women’s dress and behavior made by those at the highest level of government, Pakistan is in a far place from such a redemptive goal. Not only did Imran Khan make such a dishonorable statement revealing his inner mullah credentials, but he was endorsed in ringing tones by other actual mullahs. *Arab News* reported that:

Major clerics and religious bodies also announced their support on Thursday for PM Khan’s statement, saying “obscurity and nudity played a key role behind instances of molestation and abuse” and the prime minister’s stance would be “lauded” at Friday congregation prayers around the country.

More dismaying was the endorsement of Imran Khan’s woman-hating views by Rohail Hyatt, the founder-creator of Pakistan’s most popular TV music show, *Coke Studio*. He tweeted

“I believe @ImranKhanPTI words have been taken out of context and a big ruckus created by the so-called champions of Freedom and Liberty. He’s clearly condemning rape and giving a message that going out of the boundaries of modesty invites trouble and who can deny this fact?”

Wow. A man credited with the revival of Pakistan’s music industry that had become the target of extremists wanting to ban music (especially women singers) as “indecent” and against Islamic values, now backing a statement that links rape and abuse to “going out of the boundaries of modesty” when said “modesty” is most firmly enjoined upon women—well, what more needs to be said? Has he forgotten how several women singers and dancers from the northern areas of Pakistan were targeted and killed by both the Taliban and by male relatives for “dishonoring” their families for “going outside the bounds of modesty” required by Islam? Aiman Udas, Shabana, Ghazala Javed....and then in the heartland of Punjab, the shocking murder euphemistically called “honor killing” of social media star Qandeel Baloch, at the hands of her brother.

This intolerant mindset reappearing with renewed force not just in the actions demanded by the TLP but echoed through the behavior and remarks of the political and cultural male elite like Imran Khan and Rohail Hyatt[1], is an indication of how deep the rot of extremist and irrational thinking has settled into the fabric of the country's citizenry. The few brave souls who still try to mount a defense of the arts, of the role of culture and humanity in building tolerant societies, such as the film and TV drama director Sarmad Khoosat, end up too often becoming targets of hate and death threats for their creative work. Despite having been cleared-twice-by Pakistan's film Censor Board—and then being nominated by the government as Pakistan's entry to the Oscars this year—Khoosat's film *Zindagi Tamasha (Life is a Circus)* ended up being banned to audiences in the country following TLP leader Rizvi's claims that it was blasphemous. Mr. Rizvi apparently became enraged at its portrayal of a cleric in the movie, "who loosely hurls accusations of blasphemy against the protagonist, and is painted as a sneering, arrogant man who turns a blind eye to child sex abuse in his own seminary." How this fictional portrayal of a cleric is seen as committing blasphemy against the Quran or the Holy Prophet is beyond comprehension since it has no basis in anything rational!

According to Raza Rumi, the shelving of the film by the government despite having been cleared by the Censor Board, reflects a decades-long trend of Pakistani authorities appeasing the religious right. Says Rumi:

This is a trend that has been there for a long time, and it's been growing over the decades, with more and more pressure from the religious lobbies. Every government attempts to appease them, because it's a risk to anger the mullahs.

It is a risk, because as Rumi clarifies, "The mullahs have street power in Pakistan."

Murtaza Solangi, a colleague of Rumi at *Naya Daur*, believes like other critics of the current ruling coalition of the prime minister Imran Khan, that "because it is indebted to the country's powerful military establishment for being propelled to power," it is "easier to blackmail them and put them under pressure."

Blackmail or Belief, whatever is propelling Imran Khan and the rape culture that he is abetting with his outrageous remarks—the man and his acolytes need to be stopped.

#### **Notes.**

feminist scholar, Fatema Mernissi of Morocco: *The Veil and the Male Elite*, in which she brilliantly uncovers the misogynistic fears and anxieties of male interpreters of the Quran. How she would have scoffed at the similar shenanigans playing out today in the Pakistani context.

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